

# Potomac Heritage Trail

## Parks As Classrooms

Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail  
District of Columbia/Maryland/  
Virginia/Pennsylvania

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



## Historical Contexts for Fort Circle Parks: A Framework for Curriculum Development and On-Site Education



### Opportunities for Educational Development

The Fort Circle Parks is a ring of Civil War forts that surround the city of Washington, D.C. A description of the Fort Circle and a map locating each fort in the ring is available at <http://www.nps.gov/cwdw/>. Taken as a whole, the fortifications reflect efforts to defend the United States capital from Confederate forces during the Civil War. At present, the National Park Service (NPS) is supporting a variety of partnerships—with agencies in the District of Columbia, local organizations, and neighborhood groups, as well as the Landscape Architecture Program at the University of Maryland, College Park—to improve the visibility and use of the Fort Circle as a travel destination and educational resource. Developing a “Fort Circle Parks Trail” on park lands and along city streets is a major project.



In September of 2004, the National Park Service approved a management plan for the Fort Circle Parks. The plan describes, in broad terms, a plan for improving the use, management and development of the Parks. Several aspects of this plan hold promise for encouraging the development of various educational initiatives. First, the plan identifies several interpretive themes on which to build visitor programming and develop an intellectual link among the various sites that compose the circle. Second, the plan recommends the creation or improvement of visitor services at Fort Stevens and Fort Dupont. Third, it specifically identifies two forts --Fort Marcy and Fort Ward—that provide logical entry points for visitors. Fort Marcy’s prominent location on the George Washington Memorial Parkway creates a logical point of entryway for a large number of tourists, and as such, the report recommends a shift in focus for site interpretation, introducing visitors to the concept of the Fort Circle and the military practices of defense during the Civil War. The report also commends Fort Ward, managed by the City of Alexandria, for its interpretive program. It provides visitors with a larger context for understanding the Civil War in general. The report wisely recommends that plans for the Fort Circle not duplicate those efforts, but rather rely on them as part of the larger interpretive value of the Fort Circle.

### Educational Needs, Challenges and Opportunities

NPS staff and others are seeking ways to develop the educational potential of the Fort Circle Parks and the Fort Circle Parks Trail. However, in order to do so most effectively, the Park Service must recognize that teaching history with historic places is distinct from improving the educational aspect of the tourist experience. In other words, the kinds of information and experiences that will most benefit local teachers may not necessarily relate to the kinds of programming most desired by Civil War buffs and other tourists.

From the perspective of classroom learning, the most valuable aspect of the NPS management plan is its implicit recognition that the Civil War defense of Washington are best contextualized in terms of local history. Older

interpretive material related to the parks tended to emphasize the forts' relationship to the larger military history of the Civil War. The majority of the most readily accessible educational and informational material tends to rest on this older determination of site significance. Because only one of the forts –Fort Stevens—saw any military action, the Fort Circle may appear to teachers to have little significance for developing educational units on the Civil War. In short, **a narrow interpretation of “defense” as a military strategy combined with a limited notion of what kinds of stories and histories lend themselves to educational units on the Civil War tends to marginalize the broader educational usefulness of the Fort Circle.**

A cultural resource study of the Fort Circle, the full text of which is available on the Park Service website (at [http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/civilwar/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/civilwar/)), provides a strong base from which to foster the development of on-site education and classroom curriculum units that make use of the Fort Circle. The authors of the report provided rich detail about the land acquisition, labor, theory of fortification and defense and other historical information directly related to the construction of the Civil War defenses around Washington. The report also contains a wealth of primary source material and a useful bibliography as well as images of the forts, maps, individuals and troops. This incredibly rich cultural resource study provides information that is key to developing a broader context for local teachers interested in better utilizing historic places as they design curriculum and plan field trips.

### **Developing Programs for Teachers**

The presence of the Fort Circle around the District of Columbia presents educators with an opportunity to engage students in a deeper analysis of social and cultural life in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War. This guide outlines thematic frames of reference –strongly suggested by both the Park Service management plan and the cultural resource study-- for studying the Civil War in Washington, D.C. It provides links to and descriptions of easily accessible, high quality resources that teachers can use to develop classroom projects and curriculum units. It recommends specific connections between classroom learning and one or more of the sites in the Fort Circle.

This guide is only the first stage of a three or four stage process of improving the use and interpretation of the Fort Circle Parks. In stage two, the National Park Service should consider posting this document on the website of the Fort Circle Parks, under the link titled “in depth,” and inviting comment and critique from teachers and students alike. Educators, interpreters, the National Park Service and other preservation agencies currently involved in managing forts in the circle must use this guide as a vehicle for fostering the creation of new partnerships. In stage three of this process, this guide can serve as the basis for workshops, panel discussions and other programs in which we invite teachers, museum educators and curriculum experts to develop educational specific programs and curricula that will create more dynamic relationships among schools, individual sites and the Fort Circle Parks Trail.

Programs and curricula will emerge from creative collaborations between secondary school teachers and Park Service staff. For example, National Park Service staff can work with a focus group of social studies and history teachers to develop specific onsite tours, living history presentations, or thematic workshops that directly complement regional learning objectives. In turn, teachers can develop classroom curriculum units that include secondary source reading, classroom debates on topics relevant to the Civil War in Washington, and other homework and in class assignments that will provide students with historical background and critical thinking skills. Together, the Park Service and teachers can inspire student to engage in a meaningful, hands on, and experiential exploration of the Washington's Civil War history.



## **Theme One: African Americans in Civil War Washington**

**African Americans actively participated in the defense of Washington, D.C., during the Civil War, and, more broadly, in shaping the political, social and cultural atmosphere of the city during the war.**

### **Suggested Site Visits**

A targeted tour in support of this theme might include a visit to one or more of the following Fort Circle Parks:

1. Fort Stevens
2. Battery Kemble
3. Fort Reno

Each of these forts speak to the interrelationship of African American community development and the movement of Union Forces. Teachers may also incorporate a visit to Battleground National Cemetery, a Civil War Cemetery where Union soldiers killed at the Battle at Fort Stevens are buried.

4. Fort Dupont

Located in Anacostia, Fort Dupont is situated near the Anacostia historic district, and contains a cultural center where uniforms of African American soldiers are on display. Ranger led programs are available at this site. Teachers may also incorporate a visit to the Frederick Douglass House with a visit to Fort Dupont.

### **Suggestions for Classroom Learning**

In developing classroom lectures and projects for a unit on African Americans in Civil War Washington, teachers should consider including one or more of the seven following ideas and themes. Included in the description of each theme are links to primary and secondary source documents useful for curriculum development.

1. African Americans were directly involved in building the defenses of Washington.

Although African American troops did not man the weapons in any of the Fort Circle Parks, they did serve in the Provisional Brigade, encamped at Camp Casey, and they did take part in building the fortifications around Washington, as did other military units. There are many websites dedicated to the history of black troops. One of the best resources is maintained by the United States Colored Troops Institute for Local History and Family Research of Hartwick College. The website contains links to primary sources as well as important background. It is available at <http://info.hartwick.edu/usct/usct.htm>. Another excellent resource for background information and primary sources can be found at <http://www.bjmjr.com/civwar/usct.htm>, Civil War Freedom Fighters, United States Colored Troops, Summary and Index with links to primary sources.

2. The advance of Union troops tended to attract runaway slaves who were considered property and taken into the Union ranks as contraband.

Motivated to support the Union cause by the promise of freedom, these African Americans also provided labor—for which they generally were paid-- enabling the Union to erect forts quickly. Quite a bit of information about the use of African American labor—both troops and contraband—is included in [http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/civilwar/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/civilwar/).

3. The presence of the Union defenses around Washington, D.C., impacted the city's African American population and the development of the local African American community.

African American runaways and freedmen often built temporary encampments that became the basis for the establishment of more permanent African American communities. Three of the Fort Circle sites directly relate to this aspect of American Civil War History: Fort Stevens, Battery Kemble and Fort Reno. Cultural Tourism D.C. maintains a database that allows tourists to develop their own thematic tours of the city. This database also serves as a valuable guide to teachers interested in supplementing classroom study with visits to historic places. In particular, information about the relationship of African Americans to particular forts in the circle is available at <http://www.culturaltourismdc.org/info-url3948/>. African American communities evolved around both Fort Reno and Battery Kemble. Battery Kemble, built to prevent Confederate forces from entering the city over the

Chain Bridge from Northern Virginia, attracted freedmen and runaway settlers. This particular community also grew because some slaveholders who were ending their participation in slavery gave or sold parcels of land in the area to their former slaves. Beginning in 1865, a series of buildings near the fort housed African American schools, and the Union Burial Society of Georgetown maintained a black cemetery there as well. Fort Reno similarly attracted slaves in search of freedom and employment. During and after the war, freedmen built homes near the fort. Unfortunately, little evidence of this particular community remains. Fort Steven, equally significant in African American history, has a different connection to the community. Although the fort was built in 1861, it stood on property that had been the site of one of the city's earliest African American settlements, Vinegar Hill, which dates to about 1820. During and after the war, the Union Army barracks at Fort Stevens became the site of a school for former slaves.

4. African American history in Washington, D.C., does not begin with the Civil War.

Prior to the war, Washington, D.C., was a slave holding city. Slaves in Washington, D.C., were the first to be freed by federal intervention. In April of 1862, Congress enacted legislation that freed the remaining slaves in the nation's capitol and compensated slave holders for the loss of their "property." Of course, even prior to the formal abolition of slavery in the District, free African Americans had established churches, newspapers and other community groups. These communities paved the way for the District's African Americans to anticipate the end of slavery and to create schools and services that would address the needs of their community after the end of the Civil War. The best published source on African American Washingtonians in the years immediately before, during and after the Civil War is Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, editor. *First Freed: Washington, D.C., in the Emancipation Era*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 2002.

5. Slaves and freedmen in Washington, D.C., and the surrounding area opposed slavery in a number of ways, from active protest to passive resistance to planned escape.

Emily Catherine Edmonson (1835 -1895), was an African American abolitionist who worked with Frederick Douglass. Her own failed attempt to escape slavery was just one of many such stories that were published in African American and other abolitionist newspapers, pamphlets and books. Information about her is available at:

<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cfwtml.asp?url=/content/cfw/MCWHProject/MCWHArchives/MCWomenHistoryEdmonson.asp>. Perhaps the most dramatic example of antislavery activity in Washington, D.C. is the well-documented escape attempt aboard a boat named *The Pearl*. The most recent published account of this event is Josephine Pacheco's *The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac* (2005). A curriculum unit on the incident is available at <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/schools/muncaster/sojohistorical.html>. Additional published accounts available online include a copy of the first scholarly article written in 1916:

<http://www.huarchivesnet.howard.edu/0008huarnet/paynter1.htm>. TourDC, a local cultural tourism agency, organized an Underground Railroad tour of Georgetown that included information about various avenues for escape from slavery in D.C., including *The Pearl*:

<http://www.tourdc.com/Underground%20Railroad%20in%20Washington%20DC.html>

6. During the Civil War, African Americans also provided crucial information to Union troops, describing the movement of Confederate troops and the landscape around Washington, D.C.

Two excellent sources of information on the uses of African American intelligence during the Civil War can be found at: <http://www.duboislc.net/read/Dabneys.html> and <http://www.cia.gov/csi/books/dispatches/dispatch.html>

7. The development of Anacostia as an African American neighborhood is the direct result of emancipation.

An article available online provides teachers with important background on this aspect of the city's history: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/ANACOSTIA/recon.html> Frederick Douglass moved to Anacostia in 1877, and his home is now a National Historic Site. Information about the site is available at <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/wash/dc91.htm>.



## **Theme Two: An Island in a Hostile Sea, Civil War Washington**

**During the Civil War, Washington, D.C., was on high alert against attack, and the sense of an impending threat shaped much of daily life in the city between 1861 and 1865.**

### **Suggested Site Visits**

Ideas about “threat” and anxiety can be communicated to students at any of the sites in the Fort Circle Parks. However, some sites have better resources in place, are in close proximity to other relevant sites, or have a more dramatic story to tell. With this in mind, a targeted tour along the Fort Circle Parks Trail should include a visit to one or more of the following Fort Circle Parks:

#### **1. Fort Foote**

One of only two forts built to defend Washington, D.C., against Naval Attack. The water battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac at Hampton Roads, Virginia, created a sense of anxiety about the city’s vulnerability to attack by water.

#### **2. Fort Stevens**

The site of the only battle inside Washington, D.C., limits affords teachers the opportunity to speak about the human cost of war. The museum at Walter Reed Army Medical Center allows teachers and students to explore the relationship of medical history to the Civil War.

#### **3. Fort Dupont and/or any of the a number of small, neighborhood parks that contain Civil War Forts that fall under the management of the National Capital Parks East (including Fort Davis, Fort Stanton, and Fort Greble).**

These forts are excellent pathways for introducing students to the historical concept of “threat” because they allow easy access to other areas of the city. A number of historic sites that manifest various themes related to the sense of anxiety and threat that permeated Civil War Washington are clustered downtown, including Ford’s Theater where Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, the Surratt House where the conspirators hatched their plan, the Patent Office Building that doubled as a hospital, and an office building where Clara Barton ran a missing persons service. All of these sites are located in close proximity to one another and could be easily combined in a ranger-led walking tour.

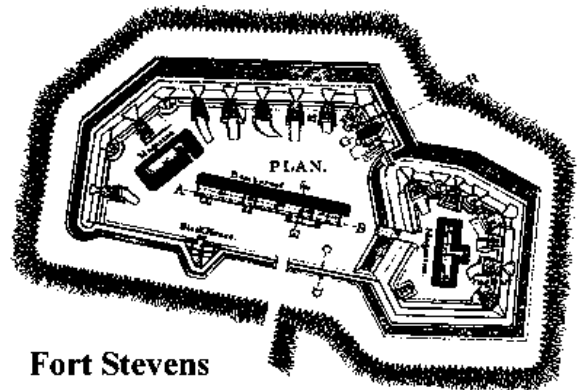
### **Suggestions for Classroom Learning**

In developing classroom lectures and projects to prepare students for a unit on life in Civil War Washington, teachers should consider including information that supports one or more of the six following themes and ideas. Included in the description of each theme are links to primary and secondary source documents useful for curriculum development.

1. During the Civil War, Washington was not only the national capital, it was also the symbol of the Union and the nerve center of Union military operations. The city was threatened throughout the war.

This interpretive statement (from the National Park Service management plan for the Fort Circle Parks Trail) provides local teachers with an opportunity to broaden their student’s understanding of what life in Civil War Washington might have *felt* like. In 2001, American University History Professor Ed Smith described Civil War Washington in these terms. His brief article

([http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/09/0920\\_washingtonwar.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/09/0920_washingtonwar.html)) explains that any period of war or national crisis directly impacts the city of Washington, D.C. During the Civil War, Washington, D.C., was literally surrounded by enemies. Both Virginia and Maryland were slave states (although Maryland did not join the Confederacy), and Richmond—just 100 miles south of D.C.—was the capital of the Confederacy. Washington was home to free people of color, slaves (until 1862) Southern sympathizers and abolitionists, and it was also



**Fort Stevens**

the seat of the Union government. Confederate spies collected information from inside government agencies and from friends in unsuspecting social networks. Wounded and dying soldiers were treated in hospitals and in makeshift hospital wards in buildings such as the U.S. Patent Office. President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in the city and his conspirators were tried and hanged. Life in Civil War Washington was marked by anxiety and uncertainty, and the circle of Forts around the city was a reminder of its potentially vulnerable position.

2. During the Civil War, the population of Washington increased from 75,000 to 120,000 as soldiers, government clerks and former slaves came to the city, and contributed to the rapid development of temporary encampments and city neighborhoods as well as to the sense of uncertainty and change that permeated Washington during the war years.

While many units on the Civil War include letters home from soldiers, teachers should encourage their students to read first hand accounts of life in Washington written by individuals who were not necessarily involved in military action. Several primary sources of this nature are available on the internet. For example, during the Civil War, Lois Bryan Adams –a Michigan native—wrote a regular column for the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, describing her experiences in Washington, D.C. A selection of her “Letters from Washington are available in pdf form at <http://www.michiganhistorymagazine.com/extra/index.html#letters>. In addition, a number of government officials and members of upper class society wrote letters, diaries and similar accounts of the impact of the war on their lives. Kathleen Dorman, Associate Editor fo the Joseph Henry Papers, describes the observations of the Smithsonian secretary in an article titled, “‘Interruptions and Embarrassments:’ The Smithsonian Institution during the Civil War.” It is available online at <http://www.si.edu/archives/ihd/jhp/Civilwar.htm>. The Library of Congress owns the Civil War diary of Judge Horatio Nelson Taft. While the diary itself has not yet been copied in digital form, a description of its contents and a bit of biographical information are available online at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/tafthtml/essay.html>.

3. The Civil War necessitated the rapid construction of hospitals in Washington, D.C., because wounded and dying soldiers arrived daily and in large numbers.

Perhaps the most poignant memoirs about life in Civil War Washington relate to the treatment of wounded and dying soldiers. Information about Civil War hospitals and medical care in Washington, D.C. is available at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/medtour/intro.html>. To staff these hospitals, nurses, doctors and volunteers also arrived in the city. Among them were the poet Walt Whitman and the writer Louisa May Alcott. Teachers can consider developing a cross-disciplinary unit on the Civil War, by coordinating with English teachers to study Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* and Whtiman’s *Drum Taps*. Excellent material on both authors is available on the internet. For example, [http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/6732/files/cb\\_alcott.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/6732/files/cb_alcott.html) contains a brief description of Louisa May Alcott’s nursing work among soldiers in D.C. Civil War hospitals and an excerpt from *Hospital Sketches*. Several critical articles on Whitman’s are also available. See particularly, <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/murraywounded/> and <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/hospital/whitman.htm>.

4. In addition to amateur nurses like Alcott and Whitman, celebrated professionals also practiced medicine in Civil War Washington, including a number of women who were pioneers in medicine.

Clara Barton, credited with founding the Red Cross, ran a missing person’s bureau out of an office on 7<sup>th</sup> Street and tended to wounded and dying soldiers. The Clara Barton National Historic Site preserves the house Barton lived in after 1897, but the website contains information about her work for the Red Cross and connects teachers to additional resources. It is accessible at <http://www.nps.gov/clba/clba.htm>. Similarly, <http://americancivilwar.com/women/cb.html> contains a brief biography of Barton and suggestions for further reading. Another promising teacher resources on the role of women in Civil War Washington is available at <http://www.northnet.org/stlawrenceaauw/walker.htm> which contains a brief history of Mary Walker Evans, the first female doctor in the United States who practiced medicine as a volunteer in the US Patent Office Hospital. Finally, excerpts from the Civil War journal of Sarah Edmonds are available at

[http://womenshistory.about.com/library/etext/bl\\_bullrun\\_001a.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/library/etext/bl_bullrun_001a.htm). Edmonds was a Washingtonian who served as both a nurse and soldier (disguised as a man). She was present at the Battle of Bull Run in Manassas, VA.

5. Espionage was an aspect of Washingtonians' wartime uncertainty and the sense of an impending "threat."

Interestingly, women are also central to the history of Civil War spies. Rose Greenhow, a well connected member of Washington society, was among the most notorious of local Confederate spies. There are numerous internet resources related to Greenhow's life and activities. A good biographical resource, with a bit of military slant, is available at <http://www.awm.lee.army.mil/greenhow.htm>. Another excellent resource on women in the Civil War and Greenhow in particular is available at <http://americancivilwar.com/women/rg.html>. In addition, a digital women's history encyclopedia at about.com contains a biography and links to primary sources. The main page on Greenhow is located at [http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/blbio\\_rose\\_greenhow.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/blbio_rose_greenhow.htm) and it contains a link to a digital collection of Rose Greenhow papers at Duke University:

<http://womenshistory.about.com/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/greenhow/>.

Greenhow was not the only Confederate spy in Washington during the Civil War. An article on Civil War espionage available at <http://www.civilwarhome.com/espionage.htm> contains broader information about Confederate intelligence networks in D.C. Of course, espionage worked in both directions during the Civil War. Union forces depended on information provided to them by slaves, escaped slaves and freemen. They coined the term "black dispatches" to describe this information. An article describing the form and uses of "black dispatches" is available at <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1694.html>.

6. The most terrifying aspect of the Civil War in Washington was the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in April of 1865.

There is a flood of information about the conspiracy to commit the crime as well as the punishment of the assassins. For teachers, the best internet resources are available at the virtual Surratt House Museum, <http://www.surratt.org/>. The website contains a history of Mary Surratt and John Wilkes Booth, links to the proceedings of the conspiracy trial, a map and description of the Booth escape route and bibliographic and other reference material that can help round out teachers' and students' understanding of the planning and implementation of the murder. In addition, an excerpt from the diary of Gideon Welles describes the President's death and provides a window into the impact his murder had on the city and the nation. Welles was Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, and the excerpt is available at <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/lincoln.htm>.

Teachers can find a primary sources related to Abraham Lincoln as well as the Daniel Weinberg Lincoln Conspirators Collection on the Indiana Historical Society website:

[http://indianahistory.org/library/digital\\_image/digitalpics.html](http://indianahistory.org/library/digital_image/digitalpics.html). For background, teachers may want to read an article by James L. Swanson that describes the execution of the assassins:

<http://www.cato.org/research/articles/swanson-020706.html>.

## **Additional Teacher Resources**

<http://www.teacheroz.com/civilwar.htm> This teacher's website has been praised by the History channel and contains dozens of classroom activities and curricula related to the Civil War.

<http://www.exploredc.org/index.php?id=342> This website run by WETA has nice, short, introductory pieces on several aspects of D.C. history during wartime. Indeed, the site provides a useful structure for developing material related to the Fort Circle: a divided capitol, a wounded city, a freedman's city

<http://www.smplanet.com/civilwar/civilwar.html> A multidisciplinary, upper elementary school unit on the Civil War that includes recommended reading, uses fiction and movies, and asks students to think about societal issues as well as battlefield history.

[http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/classroom/lesson\\_whitman.html](http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/classroom/lesson_whitman.html) The PBS website contains several very interesting classroom projects and curriculum guides related to the Civil War. One is an interdisciplinary unit on Walt Whitman. Another asks students to consider opposing viewpoints in newspapers. A third looks at soldiers letters home. Any of these activities can be adapted to a D.C. specific unit. The PBS website also contains links to other resources, primary and secondary, that teachers can use either to adapt units to their own classroom needs or to develop additional units on the Civil War.

[http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/subject\\_matter/social\\_studies/us\\_history/civilwar/](http://www.teach-nology.com/teachers/subject_matter/social_studies/us_history/civilwar/) This teacher oriented website contains links to 57 Civil War related sites where teachers can find primary sources and other useful materials

<http://www.civilwarphotos.net/files/washington.htm> This excellent link contains Civil War photographs specific to Washington, D.C.

<http://712educators.about.com/blcwphmisc12.htm> A photograph of ambulance wagon drivers in D.C., 1863.

## **Additional Information on the Fort Circle**

<http://www.nps.gov/rocr/ftcircle/> The National Park Service overview of the Civil War Defense of Washington, with a few hot links on specific forts

<http://oha.ci.alexandria.va.us/fortward/> The Fort Ward site has good historical information as well as material aimed at students and teachers

<http://www.nps.gov/fowa/extend.htm> This is the extended information section from the Fort Washington website, containing historical background information

<http://www.nps.gov/fowa/foote.htm> Linked from the Fort Washington page, this is extended information on Fort Foote

<http://www.nps.gov/gwmp/fohu/forgotten.htm>: This is a nice "forgotten history" section on Fort Hunt which was used as part of the coastal defense, but also was the site of other historical events, including interrogation of German POWs.

<http://www.nps.gov/nace/ftdupont.htm>

<http://www.nps.gov/gwmp/vapa/FtMarcy.htm>

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September 2005

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